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ABSTRACT

The United Kingdom's Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA), UK SKILLS, and the Further Education Skills Competition Council conducted a collaborative action research project to improve students' vocational learning and skills through enhanced learning experiences. From February 2001 to April 2002, three further education colleges worked to develop and test improved curriculum models within their own vocational areas, which were as follows: (1) hospitality and tourism; (2) media, photography, and performing arts; and (3) fabric painting and decorating. LSDA and UK SKILLS held a residential briefing and planning event for all three teams, after which the teams worked to identify positive aspects of their existing curricula and additional elements that could be added to them to raise student performance levels. The following were among the practices and elements piloted: (1) a curriculum structured around small steps of achievement; (2) intensive tutoring; (3) integrated development of personal, key performance, and employability skills; (4) extra contact time; (5) different assessment strategies; (6) exchange visits; (7) work-based training; (8) application of professional standards; and (8) simulation of real-life experience when work-based learning could not be arranged. All three colleges confirmed that the project benefited students and staff involved in the project and colleges' staff and management as a whole. (MN)

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From competence to excellence

Developing excellence in vocational skills

Barry Smeaton, Maria Hughes and Graeme Hall

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Contents **Page**

Foreword 3

A rationale for the development of vocational excellence 4

The project 8

Aims and expectations *8*
Outcomes *9*
Method and timescale *9*

Getting started 11

The action plans 16

The colleges' strategies 21

Teaching, learning and assessment strategies 25

Work-based training working with the professionals 30

Improved links with employers 32

Competitions 33

Value added 36

Impact of the project 39

Project management 43

Taking the project further 46

The colleges *46*
UK SKILLS *49*
LSDA *49*

Lessons to be learnt 51

Notes 54

Foreword

The National Skills Task Force identified the need for vocational training which placed greater emphasis on the development of technical knowledge and skills, and key and basic skills, to secure UK competitiveness. These sentiments were echoed in David Blunkett's statement to the Association of Colleges Annual Conference in November 2000. This statement outlined the need to develop the capacity of colleges and other providers to deliver higher level and specialist skills in his vision for a modern skills supply system, proposed as being '...the re-invention for a new century of vocational and technical education ...of the same standard and delivered with the same rigour, as academic opportunities [with] new approaches to delivery...'

The statement heralded the development of the Centres of Vocational Excellence programme. However, in order to achieve these ambitions there is a need to develop a curriculum for vocational excellence which extends learners' capacity to sustain higher level skills as the norm within the workforce.

'From competence to excellence' was a modest project, not reliant on a major financial commitment for its success. It mobilised the energies of committed practitioners in order to adapt the content and delivery of their learning programmes to promote excellence.

Initially, the project concentrated on the medium of skill competitions – and the enhanced learning opportunities that colleges provided in preparing for and participating in them – as motivators for the learners. Although the competitions were the primary reason for developing the strategies successfully used, it became obvious that outcomes were emerging which had wider implications for the development of a curriculum for excellence in skills development. The curriculum enhancements and teaching methods are proving to be transferable, with far broader implications for the raising of standards in vocational learning. The project will now extend into second and further phases.

The project also reflects a new and effective partnership between two centrally placed national agencies – UK SKILLS and the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA) – working together in support of a national government agenda for the improvement of vocational education and training. This partnership is to continue in the next phase of the development.

Chris Humphries,
Chairman
UK SKILLS

Chris Hughes
Chief Executive
LSDA

A rationale for the development of vocational excellence

The final report of the National Skills Task Force in June 2000,[1] identified the need for vocational training which placed greater emphasis on the development of technical knowledge and skills, and key and basic skills, to secure UK competitiveness. The report emphasised the need for greater breadth of accredited knowledge and skills in young people who choose a vocational pathway, in order to:

- enhance the status and standards of vocational training
- allow progression in their work and training
- enable them to transfer skills once they are in employment.

These conclusions are shared by UK SKILLS which had found, from its organisation of national and international competitions, that the development of vocational skills in the UK is not of sufficient depth or quality to enable our young people to compete successfully with the best of our international competitors.

Prompted by the need to pursue excellence, the LSDA, UK SKILLS and the Further Education Skills Competition Council (FESCC) have been collaborating in an action research project which aimed to secure more effective practice in the development of vocational learning and skills through an enhanced learning experience. This enhanced curriculum was primarily intended to improve success in competitions, but by so doing, it also suggests how excellence may be developed in vocational learning programmes.

The project piloted examples of how an enhanced curriculum experience might be provided to develop excellence in vocational learning. This experience provided students entering the world of work with a greater awareness of the skill levels required and attributes necessary to sustain and maintain employability.

Starting points

UK SKILLS exists to promote world-class standards in vocational skills. The interest of UK SKILLS lies in promoting not simply the development of competence within vocational education and training (VET), but in encouraging the pursuit of excellence. It does this in a number of ways, but primarily through the medium of competitions. It sets standards for national skill competitions and, every two years, organises the British entry to the World Skills Competition. However, UK SKILLS has always stressed the valuable contribution of skills competitions to raising standards within VET.

Although the UK team performed better than many previous teams at the latest World Skills Competition in Seoul, South Korea, in September 2001, the relatively poor performance of the UK in skills contests at international level has become a matter of increasing concern. There are good reasons for this poor

performance. Many of the competitors against whom our young people are competing are older, have had more training and tend to be employed in the respective industry. Nevertheless, the relatively poor performance in competitions reflects the lack of skills development in the UK's post-16 education and training system and highlights the need for a sustained effort to improve VET.

Skills deficiencies – a chronic UK problem

Concerns over the relatively small proportion of the UK population holding vocational qualifications at Levels 2 and 3 are well chronicled. The first report of the National Skills Task Force[2] identified the low numbers holding intermediate-level vocational qualifications – particularly in comparison with countries such as Germany and the Netherlands – as a major skills deficiency in the UK. This same report profiled the skills needs of the engineering, construction and information technology (IT) sectors. The report quoted the *Industrial Trends Survey*, published by the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) in April 1998, which showed that 19% of engineering firms expected a shortage of skilled labour to limit output. Shortages appeared to occur primarily at the skilled technician and craft level, particularly in the quantity and quality of the workforce's vocational skills. There were also reports of difficulties in recruiting skilled manual workers in the construction industry. In IT, there was clear evidence of a shortfall of specialists.

At the same time as demands for higher skills are increasing, the quality and extent of vocational learning is seen to be declining. The increasing proportion of lower-level, general education being undertaken in post-16 education and training illustrates the success of widening participation. However, there has also been a marked decline in Level 3 provision for vocational subjects and qualifications. The Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVE) programme has recognised that colleges and other major providers need to be encouraged to strive for excellence in vocational learning. LSDA's earlier work[3] identified several key features that predispose the provision of vocational excellence. These included a curriculum experience which was supported by relevant additional studies, to reinforce the learning in the main vocational area. This experience should include good practical tuition, the sound development of theory, and a supporting curriculum which develops attitudes and life skills as well as technical competence.

Developing a curriculum for excellence

It was against this background that LSDA and UK SKILLS cooperated in a project that looked at how to develop mastery and excellence in vocational learning. The project sought answers to whether, and how, training programmes might be enhanced to enable young people to perform at world-class levels. The intention was to examine possible models of curriculum design, as well as

teaching, learning and assessment strategies, which might lead to improved results among young people engaged in international competitions.

A robust foundation for vocational learning

Within UK SKILLS, there are growing concerns, shared by other stakeholders, that National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) alone do not provide a sound foundation for people entering the workforce for the first time, or at a formative stage in their career. NVQs are not thought to provide a sufficiently robust basis for initial vocational training. Much work has been done to strengthen the knowledge content of NVQs, and to include other qualifications within Modern Apprenticeships, in order to enable young people to secure a deeper understanding of the theory and practical applications of their training. But more still needs to be done if our young people are to compete successfully with the best in the world.

Success in competitions depends not only on a competitor having high technical ability and a good understanding of the subject, but on a number of essential skills and attributes. These include a candidate's ability to explain what he or she is doing; to interpret an unfamiliar brief; to act and react calmly when under pressure; and to make adjustments to the work in progress when work conditions and circumstances are changing. Performing to a standard of excellence, whether in competitions or in the workplace, requires well-developed personal and key skills as well as technical competence.

Importance of the wider key skills

Reforms of post-16 learning have stressed the importance of the key skills of Communication, Application of Number and IT. The wider key skills of Improving Own Performance, Working with Others and Problem Solving have received less attention. This is at odds with much research evidence which points to the wider key skills as highly regarded by employers; UK SKILLS, too, confirms that these skills are of great value in helping young people achieve success in skills competitions.

The National Skills Task Force commissioned a major survey of employers for its final report.[4] This survey identified additional transferable skills and attributes which employers look for in their employees. These included:

- reasoning skills
- the ability to schedule work and diagnose work problems
- work-process management skills
- the ability to visualise output and to plan work accordingly.

The National Skills Task Force used the phrase 'generic skills' to cover all six key skills and such additional transferable skills for which employers look.

There is a close correlation between success in international skills competitions and the possession and demonstration of a number of key attributes. UK SKILLS, in conjunction with Skillbuild and ERAS Ltd, identified the skills and attributes which are essential for success in competitions. These are:

- strong motivation and a competitive spirit among competitors
- an ability to plan and organise work effectively
- a consistent awareness of high standards
- resilience and the ability to work under pressure
- good social and communication skills, including those required for effective teamwork.

Without teaching and learning strategies specifically aimed at developing the pre-requisite skills and attributes described above, young people are less likely to be successful in competitions.

The project

While the immediate concern of UK SKILLS was to raise to the highest levels the achievement of young people who enter skills competitions, the LSDA recognised that the development of these skills and attributes would be useful to all learners in initial VET. It was thought that the enhanced technical skills, and a deeper understanding of the vocational area, together with the improved personal qualities and attributes which come from an emphasis on the development of transferable and key skills, will not only improve performance in skills competitions, but will generally improve performance during training and in the workplace.

Aims and expectations

LSDA and UK SKILLS saw the project as an opportunity to explore:

- how the achievement levels of competitors engaged in UK and international skills competitions could be raised, in line with the government's policy of achieving and celebrating excellence

- how to improve the technical skills of students by suggesting modifications to existing curricula, and thus provide models of good practice which could be used in the training of students engaged in VET generally.

For the colleges and students who participated in the project, the aims were to:

- provide students on selected programmes of study with a broader and deeper learning experience, which would enable them to improve their technical and personal skills, transforming competent practice into excellent practice

- identify the factors within these enhanced programmes, including the skills and attributes, which contribute to the improved performance of students in skills competitions

- provide the students with a greater awareness of the standards and skill levels required in the workplace, to ensure that they are able to plan and carry out work to a high standard

- ensure that the students were aware of, and developed, the attributes necessary to sustain their employability.

Outcomes

It was anticipated that the project would produce:

- different approaches to the design of the curriculum, and to teaching and learning strategies, which would promote excellent practice within vocational specialisms
- an assessment of the effectiveness of these different approaches in preparing students for successful participation in skills competitions
- recommendations on the design of vocational courses which would have general applicability
- models of good practice in the training of students engaged in VET, which could be widely disseminated.

Method and timescale

The project commenced in February 2001 and was concluded in April 2002. Three colleges with experience of competitions and a commitment to them were invited to take part in the project. Each college selected a vocational area staffed by expert practitioners, who were enthusiastically engaged in competitions or keen to become involved in them, and who would be keen to develop and test curriculum models within their own vocational area.

The colleges and their vocational specialisms were:

- Llandrillo College, school of hospitality and tourism
- Derby College, department of media, photography and performing arts
- Leeds College of Building, fabrics division (painting and decorating).

A team leader from each college worked with a small team of staff in the vocational area to design and implement the enhanced curriculum. The team leaders from the three colleges formed a core group and their activity was co-ordinated by LSDA. Meetings of the core group were held once a term to help to develop the project, share experiences and report on progress.

Development meetings involving the LSDA consultant and the project team were held on a regular basis in each college to plan and report on the additional elements of the learning programme and to support the team in the implementation of the project. Each college team ensured that there were opportunities for the learners involved in the project to take part in one or more skills competitions. The colleges also reported on the outcomes of their contribution to the overall project and suggested models of good practice, based on the college's experience, which could be taken forward by others.

Determining enhancements

In each of the three colleges, the project team was asked to:

- draft criteria which would illustrate excellent, rather than competent, performance
- compare the competencies of the NVQ (or other qualifications) with the skills identified as being required for successful participation in international skills competitions
- propose modifications to the curriculum and to teaching and learning strategies, and suggest what additional training and course elements might be required
- carry out the training with a group of students
- enter these students for an appropriate skills competition
- assess the effectiveness of the additional training, and review and report on the process.

Management and funding

Having identified the subject areas and the staff who would be involved in the project, college managers were asked to:

- adjust the workload of these staff, if necessary, to enable them to carry out the tasks required by the project
- allow a group of students to participate in the project
- allow these students to undertake a modified and enhanced learning programme which would help them to develop the skills and attributes required for successful participation in skills competitions
- allow the students to participate in one or more skills competitions, in conjunction with another college whose students were not otherwise involved in the project.

Each college received £8000 from UK SKILLS and the LSDA to support their participation in the project; this was largely spent on securing time for development of the enhancements, and for specific additional tuition. At an early stage, the colleges produced a budget showing how they intended to use the funding.

Getting started

In order to get the project under way, LSDA and UK SKILLS held a residential briefing and planning event, attended by the project teams from the three colleges. The event provided the opportunity to brief college teams about the project and to engage in in-depth consideration of the enhancements needed to secure a curriculum to develop excellence.

Reviewing current provision

The teams explored the positive and negative aspects of the programmes being considered for enhancement.

The performing arts provision (Derby College) identified positive aspects of their current curriculum offer. These included:

- the broad range of vocational and technical skills covered
- the strong relationship of the provision to industry requirements and the awareness of these needs by the project team
- the inclusion of teamwork and confidence building in the course, and the resulting cohesion in the student groups
- realistic targets
- the development of students' ability to critically evaluate processes and outcomes
- students' open access to facilities which enables them to continue with work outside class time
- regular exposure to a range of performances and other professional skills, such as media, dance, DTP
- careful and continuous monitoring of progress and success; for example, one-to-one tutorials
- access to good off-site professional-standard equipment
- other professional skills exploited and understood.

Positive aspects of the construction team's NVQ curriculum at Leeds College of Building were seen to be:

- the provision of good basic, work-related, practical experience
- capacity to allow students to work at their own pace and be placed at an appropriate level
- the scope for a group with a wider range of ability to gain a qualification
- recognition and accreditation of existing ability, which is particularly useful for adult learners
- key skills – when contextualised to be trade-specific
- directed learning

- motivated staff who respect students, maintain discipline and can relate work in college to experience in the workplace
- practical application of theories.

The hospitality and catering team (Llandrillo College) saw positive aspects of their provision as being:

- the team approach of both staff and students which draws on the strengths of a wide range of individuals' efforts
- the capacity to develop 'right first time' performance in a realistic working environment
- the capacity to accommodate different levels of ability working together
- high-level individual skills development
- the wide variety of experience and types of learning for students.

Aspects of delivery working well at Llandrillo College (hospitality and catering) were perceived as being:

- discrete theory lessons
- the 'NVQ review hour', where assessment schedules were planned to overcome the problem of assessment overload
- widening participation (though this put pressure on staff who were working with less able students with poor basic skills)
- screening/one-to-one support workers
- student work-shift systems (using technical support staff)
- weekly training/staff development sessions
- peer review/students involved in course review.

Issues to address

The performing arts team (Derby College) identified the perception of students that key skills were not an essential part of the course as a major weakness in the provision. Students are not motivated to complete their key skills work, as the qualification can be gained without them. They also concluded that lack of funding restricts opportunities for individual rehearsal and tuition.

Lack of class contact time was also identified by the construction team (Leeds College of Building) as a major barrier to the development of excellence. Outcome-related funding, which puts pressure on the staff team to get students through quickly, was seen to contribute to this.

Many of the construction students have problems with basic skills and have poor self-management skills. Some have difficulty in reading or understanding written instructions – for example, on worksheets – so directed study time is not used well. The hospitality and catering team at Llandrillo College echoed this concern.

The rigidity of the curriculum, its lack of depth, absence of problem solving and lack of differentiation in the award through credit or distinction were also seen as major problems by the construction team. A lack of depth and insufficient emphasis on the development of underpinning knowledge were also noted as weaknesses by the hospitality and catering team.

Both the construction and hospitality & catering teams saw bureaucracy as taking away time from teaching; both also noted the overemphasis on assessment of skills as opposed to their development.

Possible improvements

The performing arts team at Derby College suggested improvements to their provision, such as:

- more individual instrument tuition, although funding for individual attention is limited
- more work on teamwork and the key skills of Improving Own Learning and Performance and Working with Others
- combining year groups to work together, with a 'buddy' system for Level 3 students
- early residential experience
- more exposure of students to performance at an early stage
- broadening the range of professional music makers who work on the course, and having more partnerships with industry
- contextualising key skills for music
- measuring aspects of 'value added' – such as the progress made by students in their professional instrumental performance and in their personal development
- providing work-based training at the start of Year 1/end of Year 1
- more emphasis on, and investment in, the induction phase of the programme
- more nurturing and confidence building to instil a sense of group identity and personal responsibility
- better monitoring of progress, with smaller steps to success.

The construction team from Leeds College of Building thought that areas for improvement included:

- the development of IT and communication skills
- the production of work packages and materials to support more effective student-centred learning
- increased staff motivation through the development of their capacity to meet the needs of mixed-ability groups
- streamlining administrative systems and administrative support.

The hospitality and catering team from Llandrillo College saw possible enrichment and extension of provision through:

- differentiation in key skills teaching to take account of different starting points
- skills development in induction programmes
- 'quick wins' – through the achievement of qualifications such as health & safety and basic hygiene
- 'learning by example', through demonstrations and master classes, visits to high-quality hotels and restaurants
- more practice to improve performance
- developing an awareness of non-verbal communication
- emphasis on health and fitness, deportment etc, with spot checks on appearance
- consultation with focus groups of employers.

Similar problems

While the range of programmes involved in the project was quite broad, a high degree of similarity was evident in the problems identified. All teams appeared to be frustrated by the lack of time to develop technical expertise, and by what they perceived as the lack of high expectations in the level of performance required in order to achieve the qualification. Poor basic and key skills were also seen as an inhibitor to successful vocational learning.

Generic characteristics

The project teams discussed and agreed the generic characteristics identified by UK SKILLS as being prerequisites of excellence, and agreed which were to be developed in the enhanced provision. They identified, within the context of their own vocational areas, what constituted excellent, as opposed to competent, performance. They then identified the skills and attributes that they thought necessary for young people to develop, if they were to be able to produce excellent standards of work and to be successful in competitions. Each project team discussed their existing courses and proposed modifications to the content of their existing curricula and to teaching and learning strategies, which would enable the students to develop these skills and attributes.

The necessary generic skills and competencies were seen to include:

- technical skills and knowledge

- critical evaluation – students need to be critically aware of:
  - their own work
  - the work of others
  - the importance of consistency in standards

- organisational skills
  - detailed scheduling and anticipation of difficulties
  - conforming to safety standards
  - methodical working practices, attention to detail, tidiness
  - breaking tasks down into stages
  - setting priorities

- social and communication skills
  - enthusiasm
  - confidence and resilience
  - appearance
  - perseverance
  - assertiveness
  - motivation and competitive spirit
  - determination – desire to win
  - resilience (I can do this)
  - ability to work alone and also in a team.

The action plans

Once the teams had explored the extent to which their provision promoted the skills and attributes to develop excellence, they considered the changes they would make to their teaching programmes and the strategies they would adopt over the next 12 months. They produced action plans , which focused on enhancements to the learning programmes that the teams would provide over and above their normal curricula in order to raise the level of the students' performance.

Implementing the action plan

The colleges received support during the implementation of their enhanced curricula. The project group met on three occasions during the project to share experiences and to report on progress. In the light of the students' reactions and the experience of the teachers, team members reviewed their action plans on a regular basis and suggested modifications and additions to them.

Between these meetings, the colleges were visited by the project consultant who gave advice on the management of the project, and on the development of their curricula.

The learning contexts

Each college identified specific learning contexts for the project.

Derby College

The music department at Derby College is one of the institution's newest curriculum areas. It was established only five months prior to the commencement of the project. The staff welcomed the opportunity to think again about their curriculum while it was being implemented for the first time and while they were still refining it.

The staff had not been involved in competitions before, and the project prompted them to build a strong focus on the competitive side of performance into their programmes. At the same time, a lack of prior experience of internal college, regional or national competitions meant that they were unable to benchmark the students' performance against previous results.

Derby College selected two groups of students for the project:

- BTEC National Diploma in popular music/music technology: these Level 3 students were in the first year of their course and began to participate in the project straight away, from Easter 2001

- Labyrinth students: a new cohort of Level 2 students who joined the project after enrolling in September 2001.

The college chose to work with the students on these two courses so that they could assess the impact of the project on two different levels of study and compare the progress of one group with the other. All the students on these courses were included in the revised programme of study. The college chose to include the Labyrinth programme because retention and achievement rates had not been good on Level 2 courses. The project action plan therefore supported the music department's aims of raising retention and achievement rates and helped to achieve departmental quality improvement targets.

The case studies which follow provide some insight into the characteristics of students involved in the project from Derby College.

Student A

Student A is now in her second year of study for a BTEC National Diploma in popular music. She is 18 years old and came to study at Derby College after her GCSEs.

An initial self-assessment questionnaire suggested that she was lacking confidence in all aspects of college life, as she had given herself such low marks. She became overcritical of her playing and could not play in front of an audience. She was anxious about everyday activities, such as talking to strangers on the telephone. Through her individual piano and singing lessons, her confidence grew tremendously. The performance projects at Earls Court and the Science Museum, and her attendance at the Brathay residential course helped her to build trusting relationships. This provided the first steps towards being comfortable playing in front of others. Her belief in her own ability slowly transformed.

In September 2001, she discovered that she was one of the winning team in the FESCC Popular Music Competition. This was a turning point, evidenced later in the autumn term when she sang a solo in front of more than 100 people, and on the residential course, scaled a waterfall and walked a rope 30 feet up in the air.

By this point, she understood how to organise herself in order to be successful. She realised that it was all right to do badly, as long as she understood how to get it right and to try again.

In the last questionnaire, she gave herself higher and more realistic marks. She has applied through UCAS to six institutions. So far, she has been offered a place at all the institutions for which she has auditioned.

Student B

Student B is in his second year of study for a BTEC National Diploma in music technology. He is 28 years old and married with four children under the age of 10.

When he began the course, he made it clear that he was a music technology student and not a performer. At that point, there were everyday tasks that he could not do, such as travelling on a train. After personal tutorials, he performed under protest.

During the project, he realised his potential in many ways. He took every opportunity and realised what he could achieve if he had a go. This was especially apparent when he attended the Brathay residential course. He gave 100% to the team and trust-building tasks.

On the last day, the climax of the trip was to climb a 30-foot pole and jump off. It took him a long time to decide, initially, not to take the challenge. Everyone had taken his or her turn when he changed his mind. He physically shook while he climbed the pole and jumped.

This trip represented one milestone after another for him. His other achievements during the project included performing on keyboard at Earls Court; composing for and performing at the Science Museum; and composing last year's winning music in the National FESCC Popular Music Competition.

Llandrillo College

The school of hospitality and tourism at Llandrillo College has wide experience of competitions at local, regional, European and international levels. The school had been awarded Grade 1 in its latest Estyn inspection. The students were briefed about the project in June 2001 and presentations were made to all the classes in the school. In September 2001, Llandrillo selected 12 students to take part in the project. The students were volunteers. This was important, as the enhanced curriculum was very demanding and time-consuming, and included working until late on Friday evenings in the school's restaurant.

The belief that even poorly motivated students with modest entry qualifications can be motivated to succeed is borne out by the case studies of former students that follow:

Student C

Student C left school at the age of 16 and joined a local hotel as a kitchen trainee. He came to college on a part-time day-release basis and then as a full-time student. After completing an NVQ at Level 2 in hospitality and catering and professional bakery, he continued with the NVQ at Level 3 in food preparation and cooking, specialising in patisserie and confectionery. He entered the local, national, and European competitions and won many medals. He is now a member of the Welsh Culinary Team and won a gold medal in patisserie and confectionery in Switzerland. He now works full-time as chef patissiere at the Chester Grosvenor Hotel. a five-star hotel in the north of England.

Student D

Student D attended Llandrillo College on a part-time day-release basis in the school of food and hospitality management. He successfully completed the NVQ at Level 2 in food preparation and cooking. In addition, he completed a BTEC HND in food and hospitality management. His employment took him to a local hotel as a junior chef de partie, and then to St Tudno Hotel in Llandudno as sous-chef. In these establishments, he gained a lot of experience with food and modern styles of cuisine. He entered a number of competitions, including the Welsh Salon Culinaire in Llandudno with a good measure of success. He is now working in Llandrillo College in the school of hospitality and tourism as a chef instructor/work-based assessor in culinary arts.

The belief that excellence can be nurtured and developed was therefore strongly held at Llandrillo College.

The students were selected from the following courses:

- NVQ in catering and hospitality, Years 2–3
- AVCE in hospitality and catering, Year 2.

Two main areas of the curriculum were selected for the project:

- food production (kitchen)
- food and beverage service (restaurant).

The students were selected on the basis of their general commitment to their studies, their enthusiasm and their potential. Six of the students were specialising in food service, and six were training to be chefs.

A control group was identified from the remaining students. This group was taking the same basic NVQ and AVCE courses, but without the additional

elements. The progress of these students was monitored during the project to see whether any differences could be identified in the development of their technical and personal skills.

Leeds College of Building

Senior staff within Leeds College of Building have had many years' experience of national and international competitions; but for teachers of painting and decorating within the fabrics division of the college, a focus on preparing students for competitions was an innovation. The students selected to take part in the project were taking the following courses:

- NVQ Level 2 in painting and decorating, Year 1
- NVQ Level 2 in painting and decorating, Year 2.

Of the three groups of students on these courses, one was selected as the project group, while the other two formed the control groups. These latter students took the college's standard NVQ course without the additional elements. Students attended college on block-release basis. The second-year students embarked on their revised teaching programme while on a four-week block at the end of their first year, in June 2001. They attended college for a total of 11 weeks during the course of the project, but the substantial revisions to their existing programme were made from September 2001, at the beginning of their second year. The first-year students had slightly more teaching time, a total of 13 weeks, from the start of their course in September 2001 to the end of the project.

The colleges' strategies

All three college teams were committed to preparing their students to achieve the highest level of technical performance, and to develop the skills and personal attributes which they thought necessary for the students to be successful in competitions and in their working lives. The three teams, working with the different cohorts of students, in the different vocational areas, agreed their own standards which would demonstrate excellent practice in their vocational area. They also agreed within their teams the strategies which would, it was hoped, produce students who could work to these standards and would display the desired characteristics and abilities.

Each of the college teams reviewed their courses as they were currently structured, and agreed the elements that they wished to introduce into their programmes. To enable the students to achieve the highest standards of performance, the colleges agreed that their revised curricula should focus on:

- strongly motivating the students to achieve high standards
- modified teaching, learning and assessment strategies
- a residential activity
- work-based training
- improved links with professional bodies
- opportunities for the students to perform and to take part in competitions.

The main focus of the additional elements was on enabling the students to develop:

- *a professional image*
- *their social skills*
- *their customer care and good interaction with guests*
- *the quality of their work and their level of vocational skills.*

It was evident at each practical session that students were aware of the importance of good grooming, of wearing their uniform with pride, and of creating a good first impression. The students' personal appearance improved significantly during the course of the project. As their confidence grew and their knowledge improved, the students began to relax and communicate more effectively with the guests. The result of this was increased job satisfaction and, ultimately, increased customer satisfaction. The evidence of this was confirmed in the results of the European competition in Mannheim, Germany. Llandrillo College

Motivation through a sense of identity

From the beginning of the project, the students were given a specific identity. They were recognised by their fellow students on parallel courses, or by the college as a whole, as a group of students who were taking part in a specific programme. The intention was to encourage the students to identify with the aims of the project, to build a sense of cohesion among the participants, and to generate motivation, a sense of pride and belonging among the group.

At Derby College, the principal met with the students at the beginning of the academic year and confirmed the importance of the project and his support for it. The students' responsibilities were stressed, particularly when representing the college in competitions. The principal continued to support the work of the students throughout the year. He attended external events at which they performed, and presented awards. The students were strongly encouraged by their high profile within the college and by the attention their participation in the project was generating. Each student was provided with two polo shirts designed specifically for the project. The shirts enabled them to be easily identified at performances and gave the students a strong sense of belonging to a group.

> *The polo shirts were worn at all the events. The students wore them with pride. Other areas in the college have reacted positively to this innovation and are thinking of investing in them for their own students. We have had positive comments from external people about our students' appearance.*
>
> Derby College

Celebration of achievement

A strongly motivating element that was introduced was the public celebration of the students' achievements. At Derby College, the students entered the FESCC 2001 Popular Music Competition. Two of the BTEC National Diploma students won the gold award. At the Derby Assembly Rooms, students performed a piece they had written themselves. The students were invited to perform at the college's end-of-year award ceremony and to dine as guests of the college. An award was presented to the student who had made the most progress and shown the highest motivation. At the end of the course, the students performed at the launch of the new Derby College.

Launching the project

At Llandrillo College, the students who were to take part in the project were selected at the beginning of the programme. All the students were assessed and selected on the basis of their subject knowledge, their subject skills and their motivation. The project was officially launched by the college principal, and was attended by the students, their parents, senior managers, and representatives of the local catering industry. The occasion was marked by the display of students'

technical skills, by food demonstrations and by the presentation of special uniforms and a set of equipment to all the participating students. The students felt 'special and lucky and felt they were being rewarded for being good students'.

At Leeds College of Building, the students who had been selected to take part in the project were sent a letter of congratulation from the principal. Students were strongly motivated by having their work celebrated and their achievements paraded publicly. Prizes were awarded to students who performed well. Letters of commendation were sent to employers whose employees were making particularly good progress on their course. The students' work was constantly displayed and photographs of their work were exhibited on noticeboards which had been specially erected in the department.

Reward systems

Rewards were introduced for those students who were clean and tidy, worked safely, and took a pride in their appearance. This emphasised to the students that they now had to be concerned about the impression they created on employers and customers. It also served to impress upon the students that they had made a transition to an establishment that was different from the school they had recently left. Supported, and on occasions congratulated, by their fellow students and by their staff, the students' self-confidence and self-esteem grew.

> *From the first displays of the students' work – in particular, photographs of their achievements – the students reacted positively, wanting to know how they could all achieve high standards, and how you enter competitions. The students' achievements were recognised on the competition boards which will remain a permanent feature at Leeds College of Building.*
>
> *Competitions were judged by the group training officer of a large local employer, by a past president of the Association of Painting Craft Teachers, and by members of the college painting and decorating staff. In every competition, the students themselves identified the winner. All the winners and participants were rewarded with prizes. The winner and second- and third-placed competitors were presented with awards at the annual prize-giving at Leeds City Town Hall.* Leeds College of Building

Open dialogue

The introduction of a students' council and regular council meetings gave the students a sense of ownership and pride in their course. The opportunity to engage in open dialogue about the course, about the students' needs and concerns, provided a sense of cohesion within the group, and encouraged the students to perform at their best in a programme in which they felt they had a stake.

Other methods of motivating the students were designed to create a constructive and open relationship between the students and their teachers, which would foster a feeling of trust and mutual responsibility within the whole group. One activity at Leeds College of Building was less focused on the development of the students' vocational skills.

> *Another method of creating motivation and interest was tried and is now a regular event. The students suggested playing the staff at football. This could have turned into a vendetta but proved to be an excellent bonding exercise, although some of the tackling from the staff was of a somewhat dubious nature. It was played in the greatest of spirits and perhaps showed the human side of the staff.* Leeds College of Building

Teaching, learning and assessment strategies

The colleges' action plans focused on the provision of additional elements to existing provision, which would support the development of excellent, rather than competent, practitioners. Teaching, learning and assessment methods were reviewed to identify what more could be done, or what could be done differently, to improve the skills development of the students.

Small steps

At Derby College, the curriculum was redesigned to enable the students to identify small steps of achievement. In consultation with their tutors, students identified their strengths and weaknesses, and set their own targets according to their level of technical ability. This enabled the students to focus on manageable, short-term goals and to feel a sense of achievement once these had been reached.

Intensive tuition

The college staff also felt that many of the students required more intensive instrumental tuition to improve their music skills than the normal course funding would allow. Professional musicians were employed on a part-time basis to tutor the students individually or in small groups, and to lead workshops in music performance and interpretation. Through the one-to-one and small group activities, students grew in confidence as their technical skills developed.

Performance skills

The development of personal skills, so important when performing to a live audience and working in a performance and production team, was encouraged through the need for Level 2 and Level 3 students to promote strong working relationships if they were to work together successfully. This aspect of the students' development was further promoted through the better integration of key skills into the programme.

Key skills for employability

Presenting key skills as essential skills for employability raised their profile and perceptions of their utility. The key skills competencies and assignments were rewritten to integrate them specifically within the music syllabus. An integrated assignment required the students to plan the setting up of a recording studio. The students' work-based experiences were used to help in developing, and providing evidence for, key skills. The students' achievements during their residential weekend, when Level 2 and Level 3 students performed together, and during subsequent public performances, provided opportunities for the students

to demonstrate the key skills of Working with Others, Problem Solving, and Improving Own Learning and Performance.

Extra contact time

The team at Llandrillo College introduced six additional class contact hours to strengthen the students' theoretical understanding of their vocational area, and to enable them to improve their practical and psychomotor skills. Additional sessions enabled the staff to introduce advanced techniques in food production, and in food and beverage service. The students were given additional courses on wine and spirits and were able to take additional qualifications awarded by the Wine and Spirit Education Trust. Lectures on personal grooming and deportment were offered.

Different assessment strategies

The Llandrillo College team reviewed assessment strategies. The students were assessed and their progress was monitored more frequently than previously, using written tests and practical examinations. The tutors monitored the students' development of their technical skills, their subject knowledge, their dress code, and their methods of serving and interacting with customers. These assessments set criteria and targets for the students to reach, in an attempt to move them beyond the competence criteria of the NVQ to a higher level of skill. The subject knowledge of the project group was assessed and compared with that of the other NVQ students by means of a quiz, which was designed to test whether the project group had reached deeper levels of subject knowledge. External experts were invited to observe the students and provide an objective assessment of their skills development. Customers in the college's restaurant provided a weekly assessment of the students' capabilities through the completion of feedback questionnaires.

> *The whole selection and assessment process, culminating in the competitions, proved to be strongly motivating. The students remained focused and attentive in all their classes. The attendance and retention rates were 100%. There was a sense of competition between the students as each one tried to be the best. This raised the quality of their work and improved their attitudes towards their work.*
>
> *The emphasis on the development of the students' craft skills proved to be another motivating factor. The students enjoyed learning new practical tasks, such as the carving of meat, the filleting of fish, and preparing and cooking dishes on the gueridon.* Llandrillo College

Additional skills

At Leeds College of Building, additional skills were built into the teaching programme. The students were given six hours of additional instruction each week, in which they concentrated primarily on improving their technical skills. They had an opportunity to learn new and important traditional skills such as marbling, graining and other specialist effects.

Exchange visits

A visit to a partner college in Essen in Germany was organised to enable the Leeds students to carry out project work with their German counterparts, and to witness their approach to the development of skills and the standards they were achieving. The exchange visit was offered as a reward to the best six students.

> *Such travel experiences provide valuable insights into other methods of working and learning. They help provide greater depth and breadth to the curriculum, which at times can be extremely prescriptive. Such extra-curricular activities can only serve, if planned correctly, to motivate the students, capture their attention, and aid retention and the achievement of excellence.* Leeds College of Building

Residential experience

All three colleges chose to organise a residential course[5] for their students halfway through the autumn term. Courses were of three days' duration and took place in an activity centre. The courses were organised by the centres' staff and comprised, for the most part, physical activities, which were augmented in the evening by activities which the colleges had devised to meet their own particular aims.

In the case of Derby College, the students rehearsed a performance they were to conduct at the end of the weekend.

> *The students went about their soundchecks in a professional manner, with the technical crew sporting their Derby Crew polo shirts so that they were easy to identify. There were lots of problems to be resolved. At times, tempers became frayed and they had to spend time rethinking their performance techniques.* Derby College

The colleges had chosen to include a residential course in their programme, as the environment and the activities were seen as an opportunity for the students to develop many of the personal qualities which successful performance at competitions and successful working relationships require. The aims of the course were to enable the students to:

- develop personal qualities such as independence, reliability, commitment, motivation and confidence
- work effectively as a member of a team
- plan work systematically
- be able to deal with unfamiliar and unexpected situations
- cope with problems and setbacks
- solve problems.

The Derby College staff divided the students into three groups, ensuring that the students worked with team members they had not previously got to know, in order to enable them to build new relationships, as well as cement existing ones.

Activities in all three centres followed a similar pattern, with team leaders describing each activity, discussing with the students its relevance to the overall aims of the course and what was required of the team, and finally reviewing the success of the team and what had been learnt.

> *The review at the end of the afternoon was excellent. It highlighted the fact that the students had identified good teamworking skills in a very short space of time. We were impressed with the honesty and freedom with which the students spoke about their successes and failures as a team. One particular group identified that being too confident and arrogant had caused them to make silly mistakes.*
>
> Derby College

Confronted by a series of unaccustomed challenges, the students learnt to support and encourage each other. They had to recognise their own strengths and weaknesses and those of other team members, and identify how to accommodate them and compensate for them. They developed new skills, overcame fears and developed personally and professionally.

> *From the students' feedback, there was clear evidence that the residential event was very successful and had given enjoyment to all who participated. Many of the students referred to their development of positive attitudes, of team building and the creation of a team spirit. Some had enjoyed the competitive elements; others had gained confidence in their own ability.*
>
> Llandrillo College

Overcoming reluctance to take part

Most of the students were enthusiastic about taking part in a residential course. Some of the students in all three colleges had initially been reluctant to give up their own time to a course-related activity. Others were anxious about embarking on a weekend of mostly physical activities which they felt ill-equipped to undertake. However, all the students returned to college having overcome personal difficulties of one form or another, and having developed as individuals

and as team players. Many were keen to repeat the exercise at a later stage in their course.

> *The 'outward bound' course proved a huge success. The whole exercise built on teamwork, confidence building, using initiative and dealing with strange and foreign concepts. It should be a regular feature after college induction, and indeed part of this process. When you consider that students were taken out of their familiar world and into a wholly different environment, you realise that this type of exercise has wonderful benefits; benefits such as the need for self-assessment and evaluation, reliance upon others and allowing others to rely upon you. The level of leadership and participation by many was exemplary. I wonder if they got as much out of our company as we did out of theirs. They learned other skills such as orienteering, rescuing and problem solving and, not least, cooking and washing up and cleaning the premises where they washed and lived.*
>
> *Some of the questions were worthy of note: 'When do the street lights come on?' 'What time do the local buses run?' 'Can I nip down to the corner shop [8 miles away] for fags?'* Leeds College of Building

Work-based training – working with the professionals

During the project, the students had opportunities to undertake work-based training and to work with professionals engaged in their specific field. The aim was to give the students first-hand experience of the standards, strains, stresses and demands of the professional work environment. Wherever possible, the placements were chosen to match the students' desired career paths.

At Derby College, the placements included employment as an assistant engineer/technician at a recording studio, acting as a technical assistant for sound and lighting at Derby Assembly Rooms, and working and performing for a multimedia performance company.

> *While on training, the students completed a booklet, which not only documented their experience, but also encouraged them to interact and learn from professionals. The booklet was part of the evidence for a BTEC National Diploma assignment. The aims of the assignment were to enable the students to create their own career pathway, and to understand the knowledge, skills, experience and qualifications needed for their desired careers.*
>
> Derby College

Applying professional standards

The outcomes of the work-based training were very positive. The experience gave the students the opportunity to understand better the skills and knowledge required of professionals within their chosen career. It gave them an opportunity not only to observe, but to take part in, professional practice, applying professional standards within the constraints imposed by the specific industrial environment. The students developed a sense of belonging to their organisation, and a sense of responsibility towards their employers and colleagues. Many of the students were exposed for the first time to real customers, having to respond professionally to the whims and demands of both the customers and employers within their industry. For one or two students, the work-based training demonstrated that their chosen specialisation was not, in fact, the career they wanted to pursue.

Evaluating experiences

The students were required to consider in advance of the placement what they intended to learn from their experience; and afterwards, to evaluate whether their aims had been met. Students were asked to identify the professional and personal skills they had developed and what they had learnt from the placement. The employers were required to report on the attendance, ability and attitudes of the students, on the quality of their work and on the areas where further improvement was needed.

Simulating real-life experience

It may not always be possible to arrange work-based learning which develops the specific skills required in a particular aspect of a subject specialisation. The students may already be employed and attend on a day-release basis, but their work may limit the opportunity for developing some particular techniques.

The team at Leeds College of Building chose to introduce a project for their students to undertake, rather than the students spending part of their time in work-based training. The project simulated a commission of the sort that students might receive when in employment, and provided opportunities for ongoing assessment and tuition in special techniques. They were required to complete a mural within the foyer of the college. The students had to design the mural, draw it, decide on the colour scheme and the materials to be used, and as with any commercial project, cost the work. As the work was being carried out in a public place, the students were observed and interrupted by passers-by. The students were constantly being asked about their work, which encouraged them to take pride in what they were doing.

> *The mural was featured in the* Yorkshire Post. *Displays of the students' work proved extremely popular and there was a queue of students who wanted their work displayed on walls and noticeboards. The mural will be a regular feature of the training from now on.* Leeds College of Building

Improved links with employers

More active involvement

An aim of all three colleges was to improve links with their respective industries and employers. Although the project teams had worked in, or were engaged in, professional practice in some form, the recruitment of additional full-time and part-time staff who had just left employment in the industry or were still practising professionally, ensured that the teaching was up to date. The colleges already had established links with employers, but these needed to be developed further in order to ensure that the highest professional standards were being applied, through the greater involvement of employers in the design and implementation of the courses and assessment of the students.

Using visiting lecturers

At Derby College, part-time professional instrumentalists were employed to work with the students on an individual basis to help them improve their instrumental confidence and competence. The judges of the college's competition included the manager of a recording studio, the coordinator of Derby Arts in Education, and a member of staff from the University of Derby. Following their experience of the project and involvement in it, these professionals are keen to help the college develop its provision further. The firmer link with the University of Derby has strengthened the progression route of the college's students into higher-level courses.

Visits to first-rate establishments

At Llandrillo College, the staff drew on their extensive and well-established links with hoteliers in the region. Contacts were made to enable the students to visit high-class hotels and restaurants locally and nationally, to see the standards of performance expected of those working in the best establishments in the country. The students were able to take part in the preparation of food and food service in these establishments.

Competitions

The catalyst for the project had been the relatively poor showing of UK students in international competitions. Competitors from other countries have traditionally demonstrated excellence in their performance. However, staff at UK SKILLS were convinced that students from competitor countries, although technically more proficient, were not always exhibiting vastly superior technical skills within their vocational area. A major difference, however, lay in the way they approached a competition, in their care and meticulous preparation, in their speed of working, and in their personal characteristics. The three colleges, therefore, specifically prepared their students for regional, national or international competitions, focusing on the development of their technical skills, but also emphasising the development of their personal skills.

Better preparation

All three colleges had recognised, in the emphasis to be placed on preparing students for competitions, that there was an opportunity to stimulate and motivate their students to apply themselves more assiduously than they might have done without this added competitive stimulus. The focus on competitions also enabled them to acquire the skills and attributes which UK SKILLS' research had revealed as necessary for success in competitions and for work generally: namely, an ability to analyse carefully what is required; the need to recognise high standards and constantly strive to achieve them; an ability to work under pressure; to be resilient when things do not go to plan; to work effectively with others; to be able to explain to observers what you are doing and why; and a desire to win.

Taking part in competitions

The students at Llandrillo College were entered for a variety of local, regional, national and international competitions, including the Hotelympia 2002 British Open Cookery Championships, and competitions in Germany and the Netherlands.

> *The preparation for, and the participation in, competitions was the highlight of the project. The students took part in local, regional, national and European competitions, which demonstrated that the level of the students' practical skills had improved tremendously. At the European competition, which was held in Mannheim, Germany, one of the college's students took the first prize in hospitality skills, and another came fourth in the food production competition. In another competition, which was held in Maastricht, a student gained the bronze medal in food production.* Llandrillo College

Battle of the Bands

In the spring term, the Derby College students competed against bands from five other colleges in a Battle of the Bands competition. All the students were involved in some capacity, some playing or organising front-of-house, others setting up equipment and sound mixing. The standard of performance was very high, and the students displayed high levels of technical competence and professionalism. The Derby College bands were placed second and third. The third-placed band comprised students from the Level 2 and first-year Level 3 courses. In the FESCC 2001 Popular Music Competition in May, two of the college's students won the gold award.

Developing experience in public performance

Apart from competitions, the students from Derby College undertook a number of projects from early on in their course to enable them to experience the demands and pressures of public performance. The students took it in turns to perform lunchtime concerts at the college. They were invited to perform at Earls Court at the 'Tomorrow's World Live' exhibition. The students worked in groups to produce six performance pieces. They had to decide upon the equipment to be used, organise rehearsals and produce a production schedule. As a preparation for this, the students arranged to perform their pieces before a college audience.

> *The students worked very hard as individuals, as a team and with professionals on their performance. The Derby performance was an excellent rehearsal and the students reviewed every aspect to see what improvements were needed. At Earls Court, the students encountered different challenges through working with people they did not know, in unfamiliar surroundings.The students reacted well, but were not always patient when having to wait around for long periods. The students experienced real professional life for a week, which was both exciting and an eye-opener for them.*
>
> Derby College

Following their success at Earls Court, some of the students were invited to perform at the Science Museum in London.

Timed tests

Leeds College of Building organised a number of internal timed tests for the project students to complete. The nature of the tasks and the time in which they had to be completed were displayed in the workshop. The project students responded well and soon developed an ability to work quickly and accurately.

Better awareness of competition standards

Three one-day competitions were organised between the three groups of students, which replicated the competition conditions specified by Skillbuild. The best student in each group progressed to an internal final competition. Students were also entered for a national FESCC competition. The internal competitions were judged by an external specialist, the teachers and by the students themselves. By the time the competitions took place, the students were fully aware of the standards expected and identified the winning competitors. The introduction of the competitions inspired all the students to give of their best. Preparing for the competitions strongly motivated the students, whose punctuality and attendance improved. Successful students received certificates and had photos of their achievements displayed in the college.

The college had success in the FESCC competition. This was celebrated at Elland Road football ground, home of Leeds United. All the students committed themselves fully to the competitions. Set against the clock and literally thrown in at the proverbial 'deep end', all the competitors proved highly motivated and turned out some tremendous work. It is worth noting that during normal practical workshop sessions, a project of this size can take some four days, but nearly everyone completed their task within a one-day timescale. This proves that pressure can be a good motivating tool when used correctly.

The competitions put the students under the same constraints they must work under: working alone and as part of a team; maintaining good standards; motivating themselves and others; dealing with customers; learning to be polite; and understanding others' wants and needs. Endurance is another quality that makes for a good competitor, and some of our students displayed this ability. The concept of competition proved to be a spur to learning. It is a valid method because our students must face competition in the outside world. Leeds College of Building

Value added

The inclusion of one or more competitions in the programme enabled the teams to assess the impact of their teaching strategies, and to test whether the additional elements had, in fact, provided any added value to the students' experiences.

Evaluating impact

In order to be able to evaluate the impact of the additional course elements and the effect which the introduction of competitions had had on the students' performance, two of the colleges, Llandrillo and Leeds College of Building, selected students to participate in the project, and used other students from the same cohort, who did not experience the additional elements, to act as a control group.

Although the students' performance in competitions would provide a means whereby the effectiveness of the strategies could be assessed, success in competitions was not regarded as the only desirable outcome of the project. Indeed, there was no guarantee that the students would be successful in competitions. In order to determine the impact of the strategies, the colleges were asked to consider how they might assess the growth and development of their students, and the added value of the additional elements.

Assessment questionnaires

The Derby College team wanted to assess whether the students had improved their instrumental competence; had developed personal characteristics, such as increased confidence in performance; and had developed their professional discipline, including their ability to practise effectively without supervision and play under pressure. The team devised two self-assessment questionnaires.These were given to the students at three points during the programme – in April, before the instrumental lessons began, in October, after the students' performances at Earls Court and the Science Museum, and after the residential course, and finally in February, after the final competition.

One questionnaire focused on the students' attitudes towards their studies, their commitment and their future career ambitions. The other related specifically to their instrumental studies. The questionnaires were introduced as part of the students' tutorial programme. They augmented the college's Individual Learning Plan, which records the students' own assessment of their strengths and weaknesses and the assessment of their mentors, and enables the students to set targets for their own improvement.

The results from these questionnaires were discussed by the teaching staff and proved to be very useful. The results of the first questionnaire showed a number of students to be overconfident and a number to be lacking confidence. This was particularly helpful for the instrumental and performance teachers in knowing how to pitch their lessons. It was also important for the overconfident students to realise how much they could improve in their studies. By the time of the second questionnaire, the marks for the less confident students had risen. Discussion in tutorials helped them realise that this was due to the additional elements which had been included in the programme, including the instrumental tuition and their professional performances. By the third questionnaire, all the students had developed a realistic view of their own capabilities and a more accurate assessment of their strengths and weaknesses and how they need to improve.

Derby College

The team at Llandrillo College (hospitality and catering) also introduced questionnaires which asked the students to comment on their own attitudes, personal and technical development. At the beginning of the project, the students were required to identify their own strengths, to comment on their personal attributes, to identify the additional elements of their programme, and to state how they felt the enhanced programme would be of benefit to them. In the second questionnaire, the students were required to assess their current personal and technical ability in comparison with their ability at the start of the project; and to comment on the skills they were acquiring in addition to those developed on the standard NVQ programme.

Case study: Hefin Wynne Roberts

Hefin is 18 years old and decided to study catering after a brief experience in a local restaurant. Having completed a BTEC National Diploma in hospitality and catering, Hefin is now in his third year at Llandrillo College, studying NVQ Level 3 Food Preparation and Cooking. He took part in the project from the beginning.

It was not long into the course before it was noticed that Hefin had a skilful touch and a good eye when it came to cooking. Hefin soon began to realise his potential and his confidence developed. As his confidence grew, his learning increased. He quickly grasped new skills and became thirsty for more.

After a little persuasion, Hefin was encouraged to enter his first cookery competition. He impressed the judges in the regional heats and reached the finals of the National Student Chefs' Challenge 2002 in London's Earls Court.

He then went on to reach the finals of the European Palatina 2002 Competition in Germany and also reached the finals of the Gordon Ramsey UK Scholar 2002 competition, which was held in the prestigious London restaurant Petrus.

Case study: Hefin Wynne Roberts continued

Hefin lives outside the college transport zone, and so has an extra 20 miles each day to travel on top of his college bus journey. Even so, he has achieved a 100% attendance record, which shows his commitment to his course. He is a well-mannered student and, despite his success, has remained level-headed. He has a good temperament and is a popular member of his group.

Hefin has established himself as one of our most outstanding students and has just been awarded the Welsh Livery Guild Award for Excellence.

The latest feather in Hefin's cap is that he has just been elected onto the Junior Welsh Culinary Team and is to compete in Luxembourg representing his country.

Impact of the project

Throughout the project, the colleges found that the large majority of students had a very positive attitude and commitment to their task. All three colleges reported on the positive impact which the project had on the students.

> *All too often we tend not to recognise the skills of our students. The achievement of excellence is possible, but sometimes it is overtaken by apathy. All too often the attitude of 'It'll be all right' quietly slips in almost unnoticed in certain sectors of our industry. The development of the students' key skills was particularly striking. They showed significant progress in learning to work with others, working under pressure, learning patience, learning that 'near enough' is not good enough; in self-evaluation and in developing a keen and critical eye. They became more aware of others and of their own limitations.* Leeds College of Building

Benefits to students

By the end of the project, the students:

- had developed a better understanding, and a deeper and wider knowledge of their subject areas
- had developed and displayed increased confidence in their vocational skills
- were capable of demonstrating more advanced technical skills
- had developed positive and collaborative working relationships
- approached their work with a more positive and mature attitude
- were strongly self-motivated and more able to work on their own initiative
- had become more aware of their appearance and were taking a greater pride in their personal grooming, deportment and public image
- had developed a strong sense of pride in their own work and the work of others within the college
- had raised their performance to a strong competitive standard.

> *The project was brought to a close with a final competition within the college's restaurant. An evening dinner was prepared and served for 14 invited guests. The aim of the event was to test the knowledge and ability of the students who had been involved in the project, with that of the students who had not had the additional training. A wide range of skills was tested among the students who prepared and served the meal, with a view to assessing the students' ability to plan and produce work at a professional level, and to interact effectively with customers.*
>
> *Both groups, [each of] which comprised first-, second- and third-year students, were given identical menus, provided with identical facilities and equipment, and briefed on the expected outcomes of the assessment and the marking criteria.*

All the students enjoyed the occasion. It was encouraging to observe the students contributing their time and energies to the event. All the students worked hard. However, the project students had clearly benefited from their team-building exercises. There was a good rapport among the members of the team, and all of them worked with confidence. The personal appearance of the students working in the restaurant was impeccable. They were at ease with guests and interacted well with them. All the project students had developed better technical skills and a deeper understanding of their subject, which led to an all-round superior performance on the evening.

Llandrillo College

The staff teams had also benefited greatly from their experience. They had:

- worked exceptionally hard to ensure the success of the project and had developed a greater sense of pride in the courses and the course outcomes
- refreshed their teaching by the adoption of new strategies
- developed professionally, as a consequence of having to manage the project, rethink the teaching of the students' technical and key skills and prepare the students for competitions.

Further benefits

The positive impact extended beyond the students and staff involved directly in the project, to staff and managers of the college as a whole, and to all their students. Within the colleges:

- the vocational area had raised its profile and established a good reputation both regionally and nationally
- other teams became interested in the project and wanted to adopt some of its elements
- interest in competitions grew and competition entries increased
- the public celebration of successes was well received by staff and students and became a strong motivating factor for students
- student numbers on the programmes increased considerably
- retention rates improved
- links with professional bodies and other external organisations improved
- the project provided opportunities for staff development and examples of good practice which other departments and course teams could adopt.

Particular successes noted by Derby College were as follows:

- two of the BTEC National Diploma students won the gold award for the May 2001 FESCC Popular Music Competition

- the integration of the Level 2 and Level 3 students enabled some students to opt to develop combined-level performance groups

- Level 2 students performed as well as the Level 3 students in the college's internal competition and secured a place in a regional competition organised by the college

- the residential experience at Brathay enabled students within a short time to develop teamworking skills and a high level of trust in each other

- the students had a number of opportunities to perform in Derby and London

- they represented UK SKILLS at the 'Tomorrow's World Live' exhibition at Earls Court in London

- as a direct result of this, they were commissioned by the Science Year organisers to write a piece of music and perform it at the launch of Science Year at the Science Museum in London

- at both events, the students were extremely professional and this high-level exposure boosted their confidence

- one student was awarded the Competence to Excellence Award for Outstanding Achievement in Music at the college's 2001 Peak Awards ceremony

- students behaved with great professionalism before the large audience at the college's Battle of the Bands competition. All Level 2 and Level 3 students competed and gave a high level of support and encouragement to each other. A group of Level 3 students came first in the competition, and a mixed group of Level 2 and Level 3 students came second, demonstrating the degree of teamwork and collaboration that the students had developed

- at the regional Battle of the Bands competition held a month later, the college's two groups came second and third. The staff of the host venue were impressed by the confident and professional way in which all the students behaved on the day.

Leeds College of Building summarised the successes of the project as follows:

> *The main aim of the project was to promote excellence. What it has done, perhaps unexpectedly, is to make us, as a department, more proactive than reactive. Despite the constraints on our curriculum, there are still opportunities to develop excellent, rather than competent, practice, or even sufficient or adequate practice.*

The revised curriculum has:

- *increased the motivation of students*
- *developed inspiration*
- *raised standards*
- *raised awareness of traditional skills*
- *promoted competition*
- *helped students to bond*
- *increased the students' self-esteem*
- *developed their key skills*
- *given the students a voice in their own affairs*
- *uplifted staff morale within the department*
- *promoted a sense of pride within the department*
- *improved the image of the decorative trades in general.*

Leeds College of Building

Project management

As far as the management of the project was concerned, all three teams reported that:

- the project was relatively easy to manage, particularly as collaboration between the teams was good, and they received regular support from the LSDA and UK SKILLS
- the staff were committed to the success of the project and to their students achieving high standards
- the teaching teams adapted their working patterns to ensure that the action plans were fully embedded into the main curriculum. It was essential that the students regarded the additional elements as an integral part of their day-to-day learning
- the action plans were clear in their definition of who was responsible for the separate elements of its delivery, and as a result, no one person was over-burdened with tasks
- the 'value-added' systems were successful and will now be used more widely within the colleges.

Additional demands

However, the project required staff to invest a lot of extra time and effort in the additional activities which were essential to the success of the project.

All three colleges had chosen to introduce additional activities without dispensing with any existing elements of their normal teaching programme. This placed a heavy demand on teachers and students, particularly when, in the case of Leeds College of Building, the project coincided with a (very successful) OFSTED inspection. Although the teams found the project relatively easy to manage, the staff did not all possess well-developed project management skills, and staff development is required.

Timing and timetabling

Some of the staff would have welcomed more time between the planning phase and the commencement of the project to allow for the careful selection of students, and for schemes of work and assessment strategies to be more carefully considered.

It was not easy for the colleges to timetable the additional hours that were needed. In order to provide the students with the time that they required to

improve their subject knowledge, and to develop their technical skills, Llandrillo College had to timetable practical sessions on Friday afternoons from 3.00–10.00 pm. Friday evenings were a difficult time for outside speakers, and some of the students had to forfeit their part-time evening work.

Some of the additional elements, which had been identified in the original action plans, could not be included due to lack of time. Derby College, for example, was unable to find the time to include preparation for health & safety and first-aid certificates, which they had included in their original action plan. Llandrillo College had to reduce the number of visits it had planned to make to top-class hotels and restaurants. Leeds College of Building had wanted to invite external specialists to assess students' work, but had insufficient time to pursue the initial lack of response from correspondents.

Time and cost of developing essential skills

Despite the augmented teaching programme, students required a longer period of time than was available during the project to develop essential skills. Students at Llandrillo College, for example, would have benefited from a greater emphasis on the development of their communication skills, possibly through the introduction of a module on public speaking, to enable them to communicate more effectively with guests. The introduction of a French-language module would have helped the students to translate menus and compete for employment opportunities in the international market. For the food and beverage students, there was also scope to develop further their self-confidence and personal deportment.

Two of the colleges had to seek additional funding and sponsorship to support some of the additional activities. The cost of providing the additional elements has to be carefully considered if they are to be included as a regular part of the curriculum.

Work placements were, in some cases, difficult to come by within the duration of the project. Due to the nature of the industries, some students had to work shifts and at weekends. However, this enhanced their understanding of the area of work they were entering.

Specialist delivery of key skills

Not all students reacted well to key skills classes, and attendance was sometimes poor, particularly if the students saw little relevance in them. Key skills were most effectively taught when the member of staff responsible had sufficient specialist subject knowledge to enable the key skills to be effectively integrated within specialist assignments and workshop sessions. The key skills of Working with Others, Problem Solving and Improving Own Learning and Performance were seen by the students as more relevant than the other key

skills, because they could be readily integrated within the specialist classes and activities.

Taking the project further

The colleges

The project has enabled the colleges to carry out a thorough review of their courses, in order to consider which elements of their revised curricula they will retain and how the performance of their students can be enhanced.

Generic skills

The colleges concluded that if students are to achieve excellence in their vocational education and training, they need to:

- show commitment
- be enthusiastic and well motivated
- be clearly focused and determined
- be well organised
- be well presented
- be flexible
- develop a sense of responsibility
- be an effective team player
- practise technical skills regularly
- be able to work under pressure
- develop strong verbal and non-verbal communication skills
- be able to evaluate themselves and their work effectively
- be able to respond to constructive criticism
- be resourceful
- be able to solve problems
- be competitive.

Derby College has decided that all the additional elements will be retained and will become essential features of their courses.

All music/performing arts students will be studying for the additional key skills of Working with Others and Improving Own Learning and Performance. Other key skills will be further developed within the context of one of the BTEC units, to ensure that students see them as integral to their working practices. The value-added questionnaires will become an integral part of the Improving Own Learning and Performance unit and will continue to support the students' individual learning plans.

The residential course will be retained and Derby College intends to cooperate with Llandrillo College in this activity. The intention is to use enrichment funding, in part, to finance this.

Individual instrument tuition will continue to be provided, by means of college certification, for those students who have not had any formal training in this area prior to attending college. Students who have previously had private tuition will be encouraged to sit music theory exams.

A drama course, leading to certification through the Open College Network, has been incorporated as a core part of the programme, together with two hours per week which are devoted to making a music video. These activities are designed to build the students' confidence and technical understanding.

Visiting professionals will continue to be used on a regular basis to enhance the standard of teaching. Visits from The Prince's Trust and the Musicians' Union are already booked.

Collaborative projects with Viva and Derby Jazz have already been planned. The Battle of the Bands events (internal and regional) are also already in their planning stages.

Performance and celebration opportunities throughout the year are filling the calendar.

The college has submitted a bid to the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) for the Local Initiatives Fund to support the dissemination of the project's findings within the FE sector. In addition, the college intends to establish a Derbyshire Skills Competition Consortium to organise an annual calendar of skills competitions, which will be run in conjunction with local employers. The college team is also making a video of their experiences, which will be available for use by all the agencies involved in the project. The aim is to use the video to disseminate information about the project at the skills show, which will take place in November 2002.

The main issue for **Llandrillo College** was how to enhance the experience of students taking NVQs. The college's curriculum did not previously take into account the depth of understanding and the degree of skills development required by the students if they were to compete successfully with the best in Europe.

Enhancement without overload

Having introduced a range of additional activities and strategies which did indeed raise the level of the students' performance, a focus of the college's future development will be on finding ways of extending the students' experiences, without overloading them or their teachers. The college will extend its use of media technology by producing learning packages to help the students develop their theoretical understanding of their subject area. The college team estimated that up to 45% of class contact time was spent on teaching underpinning

knowledge. Consequently, additional learning materials will be made available on video, CD-ROM and online. The time saved will be used to develop the students' practical skills.

Better development of practical skills

The development of the students' practical skills should be carried out in a logical and coherent sequence. In the current courses, the team felt that insufficient attention was being paid to basic practical skills. Some students were progressing from one level to another without developing a strong foundation. This could be avoided by the introduction of standard tests or examinations at each level, which will be monitored by vocational specialists from the college and from industry.

The intention of the college is to include most of the enhanced elements in the mainstream curriculum:

- the residential weekend, which will become an integral component of NVQ courses for full-time students, in order to help them to develop their personal and key skills
- the contribution made by experts in the catering field to helping the students develop the correct personal appearance and a professional image will become a part of induction
- the Wine and Spirits Education Trust Certificate will be introduced as a compulsory additional element of the course
- high-level technical skills will be displayed through demonstrations and master classes
- work experience will expose students to the demands and expectations of the industry
- specialist staff will prepare selected students for local, national and European competitions from the first term
- the students' communication skills will be developed through written and oral presentations and public speaking.

Finding extra funding

Some of this will require additional funding and a strong commitment from staff, including a commitment to professional development. The college is confident, however, that the provision can be secured through:

- additional funds, such as sponsorship, from suppliers and employers
- the restructuring of the students' induction programme
- the funding by the LSC of the additional qualification
- the restructuring of the student and staff timetables to provide time for demonstrations and the students' presentations.

Remove non-essential elements

The painting and decorating staff at **Leeds College of Building** have carried out a thorough review of their courses and have restructured many aspects of them in the light of their experiences. Many of the additional elements they introduced are now to become an established part of the curriculum.

The painting and decorating courses have been reviewed to ensure that non-essential elements can be omitted and space created to enable the new curriculum content to be introduced. Relationships with industry will be strengthened to enable students to have a full appreciation of the standards they must reach, and to secure a greater involvement of suppliers in their support of the college.

The whole college's approach to competitions and the preparation of students is to be reviewed. Key skills have been integrated into the teaching of technical skills in the workshops. The students' need to develop good relationships with customers and an awareness of their needs is to be reinforced through greater use of information learning technology (ILT) and videoconferencing.

Staff are embarking on professional development activities in order to enhance the department's ability to teach advanced specialist skills. The project management skills which have been acquired are to be developed further and shared with other departments across the college

UK SKILLS

The three colleges approached the use of competitions in very different ways. Each approach produced significant benefits associated with encouraging students to strive for excellence and learn to compete in the supported environment of a college. Work will be undertaken by UK SKILLS to see if it is possible to define the nature of excellence in a range of common student activities and industrial/institutional models.

A case for the inclusion of competitions in the curriculum has been made. A further development will be to test different models for the inclusion of competitions in a broad range of curriculum areas, and at different academic levels. If competitions are to be developed as a curriculum tool, a national and regional competition infrastructure will be required to support the colleges, and UK SKILLS will address this need.

LSDA

The LSDA is to carry out a further research project to take the ideas developed in this project to a wider range of vocational contexts. Using the Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs) as test beds, the project will design, test and

evaluate approaches to enhancing the vocational curriculum in a range of vocational learning programmes. This project will extend the scope of the types of programme and modes of learning involved, and so add to the principles for effective vocational learning that emerged from the initial project. The CoVE networks are ideally placed to carry out this work as they now include work-based providers as well as colleges, and have a responsibility to continue to develop the vocational curriculum and disseminate the results of this to other providers.

Lessons to be learnt

A number of important lessons can be drawn from the project and from the experiences of the participating colleges.

Changing the design of courses

The colleges successfully identified elements that raised the students' vocational and personal skill levels beyond that required by their normal curriculum, and which could be grafted onto their course. The project has changed the way the colleges wish to design and implement their curricula in the future.

Raising expectations and motivation

The strategies adopted by the colleges had a strong motivating influence on the students. The students were very keen to take part in the project and took great pride in their involvement. They willingly devoted additional time to their studies. The demand for, and expectations of, professional standards of performance resulted in high standards of achievement. The students' starting points and their levels of prior achievement necessarily condition their expectation of what they can achieve. Although many students may perform and develop well, and may achieve acceptable standards in their vocational skills, the project demonstrated that it is not sufficient just to apply these standards. Students are capable of achieving more.

Gains for all students

All the students gained from the enhanced curricula, including those who were not successful in the competitions. All the students benefited from having regular assessment of their performance, competing with one another, and from detailed feedback on their performance. They responded well to having clear goals and targets, which were set at regular intervals throughout their course, and which were regularly assessed.

Skills to compete

Opportunities to perform and to participate in competitions strongly motivated the students to achieve high standards and encouraged them to demonstrate what they were capable of. Previously, the colleges had regarded competitions as a 'bolt-on' addition to their curriculum, rather than a mainstream curriculum tool. The preparation for competitions and their integration into the curriculum from the outset significantly enhanced the performance of the students.

Competitiveness is a skill. The preparation for competitions requires the development of skills and attributes which provide a sound preparation for life at work. Participation and success in competitions gave the students a heightened

sense of the value and status of their vocational studies and an increased sense of self-worth.

However, more than the introduction of competitions themselves, it is the methods used to prepare students for competitions (additional coaching, tutorials, additional practice etc) and the skills and characteristics which individuals must develop if they are to be successful in competitions, which are important in the pursuit of excellence. The inclusion of competitions within the curriculum and the opportunity for students to showcase their talents invigorated the departments and enhanced the profile of the subject area in the colleges and in the region.

Foundations for skills

The achievement of excellence requires well-developed foundation skills. The students whose foundation skills were weak found it difficult to cope with the expanded curriculum, the extra demands and the higher expectations of them. Excellent standards of work were achieved by all students involved in the project as a result of the strong commitment of the teaching staff to develop these foundation skills. The teachers identified the students' potential and nurtured it. They provided detailed and regular feedback on individuals' performance to enable them to address weaknesses and build on their strengths. They encouraged the students to observe their own work and that of their fellow students critically, yet constructively. Given the pleasing outcomes, the motivation of the teaching staff was further enhanced.

Keeping up to date

To enable the students to develop high professional standards, the teaching staff must keep abreast of the latest techniques and developments in their vocational area, and must maintain the highest level of professional competence. This means that staff must engage in continuous professional development (CPD) activities, such as short secondments to industry, and maintain close links with professional bodies, in order to update their vocational skills.

The involvement of employers, through the assessment of students, their involvement in the competitions and their demonstration of the best work practices, enabled the students to gain an insight into the standards of performance that industry expects.

Better retention

The increased motivation of students resulted in improved retention rates. In the case of Llandrillo College, the students involved in the project had a much higher attendance rate (98.5%) and retention rate (100%) compared with the students on the other full-time NVQ courses.

A curriculum which is designed to produce excellence can be aimed at a specific group of students who show potential and/or who intend to enter competitions. On the other hand, it can be designed for the whole cohort. In either case, the preparation for competitions is expensive and time-consuming. If existing courses are to be enhanced by the inclusion of competitions and their associated additional elements, the funding of such elements needs to be carefully considered.

All the colleges used the additional funding to enhance their existing courses by the inclusion of additional elements. If additional funding were not available, colleges would need to consider what they could omit from their existing curriculum and/or what they could do differently within existing timetables and resources.

Notes

1. National Skills Task Force. *Skills for all: proposals for a National Skills Agenda*. DfEE, 2000.

2. National Skills Task Force. *Towards a national skills agenda*. DfEE, 2000.

3. Learning and Skills Development Agency. *Searching for excellence in FE Colleges*. LSDA, 2001.

4. National Skills Task Force. *Skills for all: proposals for a National Skills Agenda*. DfEE, 2000.

5. LSDA and UK SKILLS emphasise the need for care and attention to the health and safety aspects of such experiences.

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